

Sunday news reported that London now exacts a congestion fee of five pounds sterling on motoring into an eight-mile zone in the inner city. Last time I left London years ago, a cab driver exacted a 75-buck train-missing fine to take me to Heathrow Airport. His chauffeur's toll left my billfold folded so thin my credit card in one pocket printed a Master Card logo on my driver's license a pocket away.

Traffic all over the shortgrass country needs a dose of decongestion. At the ranch on any single day, two oil transports and half a dozen pickups may come roaring down the county road, breaking the reverie of my front yard. The unfenced roadway of Crockett County Road 209 crosses two pastures and the horse trap. During the lambing and calving season, the sound of speeding vehicles hitting the cattleguards hard enough to rattle the windowpanes in the ranch house causes me to inhale so deep the exhalation rattles the glass again.

San Angelo was so crowded Christmas, I lost eight hours and 15 minutes going from downtown to west of the college. Broken down, I spent an hour making one round trip from Mertzon to Angelo and back. One hour at Municipal Court, six hours in class at driver's ed and 15 minutes of initial driving from town to the other side of the college, including apprehension and ticketing by a policeman for running a stop sign.

After counting the dust streams last week on the public road, I called the Crockett County road foreman to see if his department would furnish the material to fence the seven miles of right-of-way passing through the ranch. Like I told him, on so much fencing, suppliers give big discounts. Furthermore, the only place a new cattleguard was needed was leading into the headquarters. By careful planning, eight pasture gates would cover the other openings, but again as competitive as fence supplies are, a 12-foot gate shouldn't cost over \$60.

Before I could continue, he said, "I'll make a note to put you on next year's list." His voice resembled the weary tone of jugkeepers who have to deal with herders all the time. After six weeks behind a mahogany desk, the masters of compounding interest know all our tales and all our acts. Worst background possible is a banker who has defected from ranching, or is working at the bank to be able to afford the habit.

But road foremen, I suspect, sour as fast as jugkeepers as their whole bailiwick are herders. In his case, he had enough savvy of the bitterweed, mesquite and prickly pear country to know woven wire fence, 10 miles or 10 feet, wasn't going to rescue a wreck of an operation desperate enough to make the judge at a demolition derby flinch.

Sure couldn't base my request to build fence on holding trespassers and road hunters at bay. The weather

keeps legal or illegal hunters out. Hardy indeed is the hunter leasing the land. In the winter, a deer blind has to be anchored to angle iron to be steady enough to aim from in the windstorms. Also, where we once worried nights whether a headlighting hunter was going to send 180 grains of copper-coated lead through the thin walls of the ranch house at 3000 feet per second, such nocturnal sport is now a felony.

Mertzon doesn't need a congestion fee. Except around the school and on the highway going through Mertzon, traffic is light around town. At 6 A.M. school buses depart a block from my town house with the whine of motors and singing gears to interrupt sleep blocks away. Eight A.M., however, is the critical hour. Working mothers barely give kids time to dismount before fleeing the scene for far-away jobs in San Angelo. After Mother forgot me on my fifth birthday in the old post office building downtown, I can't stand watching the forlorn little tots, loaded with books and tablets, glancing back to see mothers tear away in SUVs.

But times are different. Other cities, the news items said, will probably be adopting a congestion fee like London. The toll may work for city people living in suburbs, but the way the over-populated places reek with pollution and rage with crime, a departure fee might be a bigger moneymaker.

Good thing the county isn't going to fence the right-of-way. The best grass we have is in the borrow ditches along the road. Too, it's not my style to throw up barriers for imagined causes, and I don't hold a grudge against the Wool Capital for nabbing me at the stop sign. The driver's ed curriculum will come in handy as traffic grows in our part of the country. Maybe Mertzon will be charging for passing through downtown.